



# GRADUATE UNION

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE REPORT

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## ABBREVIATIONS

UG - undergraduate  
PG - postgraduate  
PGT - postgraduate taught  
PGR - postgraduate research  
UK - United Kingdom  
EU - European Union  
EEA - European Economic Area  
WP - Widening Participation  
HE - Higher Education

# I. INTRODUCTION

International students benefit the UK culturally, economically and socially during their time in education and beyond. International students are part of British society, contributing to the diversity of people and culture in UK institutions and society. This report stemmed from the concern that European and overseas students, compared to “home” students, have a lower level of satisfaction and experience a range of issues which negatively affect their success at the collegiate university. Issues highlighted in this paper were reported by international students to student representatives including the Graduate Union (GU), Middle Combination Rooms (MCRs), faculty representatives and the Students’ Union Advice Service (SUAS). The paper also includes views collected from university and college staff working with international students. This paper thematically reports major issues and provides suggestions to address them.

## 1.1. The UK context

The UK has a long-standing advantage in providing education to international students based on the importance of English language in the global economy, the high quality of the educational courses generally offered, and employment opportunities. There are over 750,000 students who come to the UK to study each year<sup>1</sup> – in higher and further education, and in independent and language schools. Some come for short English-language courses, others for PhDs at the frontiers of scientific research.

Universities are one of the largest sectors in many local economies; they play a vital role in research and innovation in the UK economy, and international students also offer economic benefit, including cross-subsidising the education of domestic students and research. A report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)<sup>2</sup> points out that many universities make use of higher international fees to further subsidise courses for UK and EU students, as well as to plug shortfalls in research budgets. As Nick Hillman, HEPI director and the author of the report, clearly pointed out, UK universities subsidise teaching and research by using the “surplus on teaching international students”<sup>3</sup>. On average, international students pay around £5,100 per year more than it costs to educate them, around £4,250 of which typically goes towards universities’ research budgets<sup>4</sup>. Income from international students is far too often the main concern of universities and Higher Education Institutes. The HEPI 2019<sup>5</sup> report has previously shown the tax and National Insurance payments of just one cohort of international students who stay in the UK to work after their studies amounts to £3.2 billion. The

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<sup>1</sup> MAC 2018, Impact of international students in the UK, available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/739089/Impact\\_intl\\_students\\_report\\_published\\_v1.1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/739089/Impact_intl_students_report_published_v1.1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> HEPI 2020, Postgraduate Education in the UK. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Postgraduate-Education-in-the-UK.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Pie News, May 2020. UK gov’t must reconsider R&D budget – HEPI <https://thepienews.com/news/uk-govt-must-reconsider-rd-budget-hepi/>

<sup>4</sup> N. Hillman, From T to R revisited: Cross-subsidies from teaching to research after Augar and the 2.4% R&D target, HEPI, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> HEPI 2019. The UK’s tax revenues from international students post-graduation, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/03/21/just-one-cohort-of-international-students-who-stay-in-the-uk-to-work-pay-3-2-billion-in-tax-and-they-arent-taking-jobs-from-uk-citizens/>

Universities UK 2017<sup>6</sup> report shows that international students generated £25 billion to the UK economy in 2014-15.

In the context of the UK leaving the European Union (EU) the UK Government has stated its intention to develop a new immigration system. This provides an opportunity to further demonstrate the contribution that international students make to the UK and to ensure that the new system supports this. According to UCAS<sup>7</sup>, of student applicants domiciled in the EU, the highest numbers are from France, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the Republic of Ireland. EU applicants accounted for 37.7% of all non-UK applicants in 2019, down from 39.3% in 2018. This continues the downward trend since the 2016 referendum.

In recent times there has been substantial focus on aspects of the UK's policy on international students<sup>8</sup>. The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC)<sup>9</sup> has looked in detail at immigration-related aspects at the Government's request. The Higher Education Commission (HEC)<sup>10</sup> has looked at some aspects of the UK's international competitive position in higher education. The UK Government and Universities UK International (UUKi) have been working on a new Global Graduate Talent Visa and Global Talent route<sup>11</sup> in the context of competitors' post-study work offerings. There are no grounds for complacency – although international student numbers have risen in recent years, the UK's overall education sector has fallen slightly and other countries are more active in access and widening participation.

## 1.2. The Cambridge context

The city of Cambridge hosts a high number of young adults and students compared to other districts, a large number of which come from outside the UK, contributing to its vibrant international character. In 2009, more than 60% of the city of Cambridge's population was aged 25 years or older<sup>12</sup>. That is low by comparison with the other districts which show proportions around 70% each, which can be explained by the large student population within the city. In 2016-17, the combined University of Cambridge (21,656) and Anglia Ruskin University Cambridge Campus (9,425) student roll was c.30,000.

The University of Cambridge aims to be a global institution embedded in the city fabric. International students represent c.42% of our student population, c.65-70% of postgraduate

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<sup>6</sup> Universities UK March 2017. The economic impact of international students on the English regions, available at: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/International-students-now-worth-25-billion-to-UK-economy---new-research.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> UCAS – 2019 International Insights, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/320131/download?token=AfU7rqhw>

<sup>8</sup> Please note that policy on Higher and Further Education is devolved in other parts of the UK, so policy relating to students – for the purposes of this paper – may relate solely to those studying in England.

<sup>9</sup> MAC Jan 2020. Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) report: points-based system and salary thresholds, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-advisory-committee-mac-report-points-based-system-and-salary-thresholds>

<sup>10</sup> Higher Education Committee (2018). Staying Ahead. Are International Students Going Down Under?, available at: [https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/sites/site\\_hec/files/report/469/fieldreportdownload/hecreport09-18final.pdf](https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/sites/site_hec/files/report/469/fieldreportdownload/hecreport09-18final.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> TPN Jan 2020. UK: uncapped fast-track visa for int'l scientists, available at: <https://thepienews.com/news/uk-unlimited-fast-track-visa-intl-scientists/>

<sup>12</sup> Cambridge City annual demographic report, available at: <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Cambridge-City-District-Report-2011.pdf>

students are from outside the UK<sup>13</sup>, c.35% of academic staff, and c.57% of research staff are international. A significant proportion of Cambridge publications are co-authored with academics from overseas institutions (57%), and the university is actively engaged in research projects and collaborations throughout the world. This international presence is, however, not always reflected in policies and strategies of the university.

At the time of writing, the collegiate university is working on, and still needs to work on, an effective access and widening participation strategy for international students. This is to make sure that the university is recruiting “*the best*” international students from a diverse range of countries and socio-economic backgrounds. This consideration is particularly pertinent in the post-Brexit context in which the University of Cambridge is believed to likely see a dramatic drop of EU postgraduate applications from the EU<sup>14,15</sup>. As stated by UCAS<sup>16</sup>, as in 2017 and 2018, 2019 saw EU applicant numbers remain below the level seen before the 2016 EU referendum (53,560). There are significant uncertainties for shaping the university’s outlook towards international students in the next years to come, due to Brexit and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

The GU has submitted several papers<sup>17</sup> to address issues related to international students to the university, data from surveys are now available, and new strategies and policies have been drafted but not implemented yet. The university is actively looking at the level of satisfaction within schools, faculties and colleges among international students. They are affected by a number of issues. e.g. visa costs, accommodation, prejudices, behaviour on race, international identity, harassment and the gaps between how undergraduate and postgraduate students are perceived and treated. Many of these issues have also been flagged by the Universities UK reports in 2016<sup>18</sup> and 2019<sup>19</sup>. Among the many issues that need to be considered in achieving an inclusive global campus, the University of Cambridge is also looking at how the language policy affects international culture and the integration between UK/home and international students.

### 1.3. Widening participation in the UK

In the UK, the last 20 years have seen policymakers and many individual institutions of Higher Education (HE) pay far greater attention to attracting a more diverse student body, especially

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<sup>13</sup> International Student Data, available at: <https://www.internationalstudents.cam.ac.uk/applying/global-community/international-student-data>

<sup>14</sup> UCAS Applicants for UK higher education down: 7% for EU students, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/applicants-uk-higher-education-down-5-uk-students-and-7-eu-students>

<sup>15</sup> The Guardian, February 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/06/two-in-five-18-year-olds-uk-apply-study-university-this-year>

<sup>16</sup> UCAS – 2019 International Insights, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/320131/download?token=AfU7rqhw>

<sup>17</sup> E.g. papers submitted to SWAP, STEC, GBEC, and PAC in particular, aimed to draft or improve policies concerning international students.

<sup>18</sup> Universities UK 2016. Changing the culture, available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/changing-the-culture.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Universities UK 2019. International Facts and Figures, available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/Intl-facts-figs-19.aspx>

from those groups underrepresented in HE<sup>20</sup>. This has resulted in massification in terms of access to and participation in HE studies <sup>21</sup>, but issues of retention, achievement and progression for ‘Widening Participation’ (WP) for students remain problematic. A range of barriers faced by students from such backgrounds have been consistently reported in the literature<sup>22</sup>. This is particularly the case for international students and postgraduate students. At this point in time, international and postgraduate WP strategies in the UK mostly concern recruitments and admissions. They should, however, not be limited to these and should also cover the overall experience, obtainment and success of WP for students during and after their courses.

In the context of the present report, WP for international students covers a range of issues international students encounter, including recruitment and access, admission procedures, immigration requirements, language training and tests, discrimination and harassment and, accommodation arrangements. These issues will be discussed below.

#### 1.4. Aims and methods

The aim of this report is to improve the overall international student experience and to better support staff and Sabbatical officers when working with an increasingly diverse student body, especially in the light of contemporary political and economic changes in Europe. For the purpose of this report, recruitment terminology i.e. Home, EU and Overseas students is used for clarity, but the concept of *international students* will encapsulate both EU and Overseas students. The GU, however, acknowledges that none of these groups are homogenous. Furthermore, the key focus of the study is postgraduate students, although many of the recommendations made would also be valid for those who face many similar issues to the international postgraduate students.

Data from available surveys have been considered and available evidence have been presented at a Focus Group discussion. The surveys include the Big Cambridge survey, the iCUSU survey, the GU Mental Health survey, the CUCU survey on support for international staff, the Student Barometer Survey, and the Bounce-back survey. As discussed, and approved at a 2019 General Board’s Education Committee meeting and GU Council, the focus group was designed to provide an opportunity for staff and students to consider what it means for the Collegiate University of Cambridge to be an international University regarding the experience of our international students. In order to identify future strategic work on the identity of the University of Cambridge as a global university, which can deliver an international student experience, the focus group tackled two main questions:

1. To what extent does the University of Cambridge capitalise on the diversity created by its significant international student population to create a vibrant, cohesive and

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<sup>20</sup> Butcher, John; McPherson, Elaine; Shelton, Isobel; Clarke, Anactoria; Hills, Laura and Hughes, Jonathan (2017). Unfit for purpose? Rethinking the language of assessment for Widening Participation students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 19(2) pp. 27–46.

<sup>21</sup> Sambell, K., & Hubbard, A. (2004). The role of formative ‘low-stakes’ assessment in supporting non-traditional students’ retention and progression in higher education: student perspectives. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 6(2), 25-36

<sup>22</sup> Fitzgibbon, K., & Prior, J. (2006). Students' early experiences and university interventions-a timeline to aid undergraduate student retention. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 8(3), 17-27

- globally-oriented experience for all its students, whilst retaining the uniqueness of its history and traditions?
2. How can the University of Cambridge ensure that the experience of its international students is the very best it can be?

A set of four *subsidiary questions* was also asked as follows:

- a. What would a global experience look like for both UK and international students in the Cambridge context?
- b. In order to forge and sustain a global university, what would be the role of and opportunities for UK and international members of staff and students?
- c. What type of provisions and policies are missing to achieve the vision of a global campus?
- d. What are the risks of not having an international strategy that also include cultural and structural changes to make Cambridge a global campus?

The focus group was organised by the GU to discuss and to unpack the above questions on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, at the University of Cambridge Student Services Centre<sup>23</sup>. International students' issues were discussed by members of staff and students representatives. The main scope was to collect ideas to inform what we need to do for international students now and in the years to come. During the meeting, detailed notes were taken to reflect the considerations of the participants and document them, with the aim of publishing an International Student Experience Report - viz. the present paper. The main issues highlighted by surveys and the focus group have been here gathered, along with comments and suggestions presented by the participants.

## 2. MAIN CONCERNS, DATA AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section will unpack some of the main issues that have been observed by students, student representatives and members of staff of the university concerning international students. Each section will aim to briefly present the problem, the work currently done in that area, and suggestions for the future. Each section will also present a note on the possible impact of COVID19 pandemic on respective issues.

### 2.1. Satisfaction<sup>24</sup>

There are a number of factors that can affect the overall satisfaction of international students, most of which are PGT or PGR at Cambridge, but data available is currently very limited. According to the Student Barometer Survey (SBS) 2018<sup>25</sup>, the lowest scores achieved (30%-59%) were in the *Living Satisfaction* and *Arrival* categories (ibid, section 4.2, page 9) - this is especially true for PGT and PGR, but it seems to be the case for UG respondents as well. It is

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<sup>23</sup> The 18 participants include representatives from the Head of Houses (e.g. Jane Clarke), Pro-Vice-Chancellors (e.g. Graham Virgo), Senior tutors committee (e.g. Dr Mark Wormald), international Student Office (e.g. Anthony Dangerfield), Language Centre, student representatives, and Schools and Faculties. For instance, Graham Virgo (Senior Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education), the Wolfram Head.

<sup>24</sup> Use of survey data in this section has been approved by the Head of Education Services, Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO), University of Cambridge, on 26 May 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Available at: <https://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/student-engagement/university-wide-surveys/student-barometer-survey>

widely known that living costs and arrival experience disproportionately affect international students, who encounter issues such as cultural differences, access to suitable accommodation, quality of the external campus environment, challenges making friends from other countries, habituating to surroundings outside the institution, feeling safe and secure, "fitting in", language barriers and building a sense of belonging inside the student community.

The Big Cambridge Survey (BCS) 2018 reports on disparities of satisfaction amongst home and international students in terms of teaching and supervisions opportunities. According to its findings for postgraduate students from the UK, net satisfaction on the availability of teaching and supervision opportunities stands at 44%. This figure stands at 17% amongst international postgraduates, suggesting that teaching opportunities may not be distributed or allocated fairly amongst domestic and international students.

In terms of support from teaching staff and assessments, the data is concerning when we look at the gap between UK and international students. A past Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES 2016) points out that only 57% of postgraduate respondents were satisfied by the assessments of their Master's courses, which is 6.9% below the Russell Group mean. The PTES was then replaced by the Student Barometer and Bounce-back survey in the following years; however, data concerning postgraduate assessments in the Student Barometer Survey (SBS 2018) summary report is usually limited in the top-level reports<sup>26</sup>.

In the Bounce-back Survey (2018), which was administered to students on 1-year long courses, including MASTs and 1- year long MPhils currently classified as PGR on CamSIS, issues concerning assessments were flagged again. Due to the tailored nature of the survey, results cannot be compared to the Russell Group/Sector. In the Easter 2019 summary report of this survey, it is shown that the widest gaps between Home-UK and international students concern *fair and transparent marking of their work* (Home-UK = 67% vs international=50%), *clarity in marking and assessment criteria* (Home-UK = 64% vs international= 47%) and *usefulness of feedback on their coursework* (Home-UK = 62% vs international= 46%). In terms of BAME students (ibid, section 5.3, page 7), about half of the surveyed black postgraduate students saw the workload as excessive; only 48% thought the workload was not excessive<sup>27</sup>. About 45% thought that the marking of the coursework was prompt, fair and transparent, as opposed to 60% of white students who felt the same. According to the BCS 2018, while 72% of home students felt fully supported by their college teaching staff, only 62% EU students and 48% students from outside the EU held this view.

In summary, the main areas of low satisfaction for international students include living costs, arrival experience, assessments, supervision, teaching opportunities and support by teaching staff.

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<sup>26</sup> The 2016 survey may be considered "old" to refer to; however, some of the data are still relevant to observe trends and developments. Results for PGTs are available from both the Student Barometer and the Bounce-back survey for years 2018 and 2019; however, the summary reports are usually delivered to senior leaders of the University, hence certain information cannot be found in the top-level reports.

<sup>27</sup> This could have also left out some "neither agree nor disagree" responses on the point Likert scale.



## Recommendations:

- There is a need for comprehensive research and data on levels of satisfaction specifically amongst international postgraduate (and also undergraduate students). Broader surveys that target both Home and international postgraduate and undergraduate students through one instrument risk erasing the visibility of international students and their concerns.
- The data gathered centrally by the Student Barometre, Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO) or Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL), should take into account equality profiles, particularly ethnicity, gender and disabilities amongst international students. For perspective, the findings of these research must be comparable to the Russel group data and research from the broader HE sector.

### 2.2. Immigration, visa and NHS surcharge

Visa applications to secure permission to study in the UK tends to be a daunting and expensive undertaking for international students outside the EU. The GU Mental Health Report (2019)<sup>28</sup> shows that 30% of international students reported immigration and visa problems affected their mental health. Most non-EU or non-EEA nationals applying for studying in the UK must pay an 'Immigration Health Surcharge' (IHS) to the Home Office, in addition to the Visa application fee. The IHS charge, also known as NHS surcharge, has doubled since it was introduced in 2015. The current rate, in place since January 2019, is £400 per year (£300 for certain visa categories)<sup>29</sup>. In October 2020, the IHS is set to increase again to £624 per year for those wanting to acquire a Tier 2 visa, with a discounted increase to £470 per year for Tier 4 students<sup>30</sup>.

The visa fees, coupled with the continuously rising NHS surcharge, amounts to more than £800 for one year of study. For students on longer postgraduate courses (e.g. three or four years) or undergraduate students, the NHS surcharge of £470 a year, will need to be paid upfront for the duration of the course (e.g. £1,880 to cover a four-year PhD course). This amount is in itself a greater sum than the monthly cost of living expenditure (£1,095) prescribed by the government. This means that for students on scholarship stipends, the upfront payment of visa fees and NHS surcharge can be more than one month's stipend. In effect, lack of support from the University to cover visa applications and NHS surcharges can easily leave students out of pocket for a month's maintenance or more. Moreover, for students with families, the expenses for applying for a UK visa are multiple times higher, since these costs are applicable for each member of the household. The inability to afford these costs results in the forced separation of families.

The UK has one of the most restrictive post-study visa provisions for international students. Master's students are allowed less than a six-month period after graduation to find employment in the UK, while PhD students are eligible for a one-year Doctorate Extension

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<sup>28</sup> Available at: <https://www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/files/postgraduate-mhreport>

<sup>29</sup>The Immigration Health Surcharge, House of Commons, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7274/>

<sup>30</sup> Manasyan, "Immigration Health Surcharge increase to £624 from October 2020", Edmans & Co, available at: <https://edmansco.com/immigration-health-surcharge-ihs-increase-400-to-624/>

Scheme after completing their PhD. The government also imposes criteria on the type of job and salary threshold for eligibility for a Tier 2 (employment visa) sponsorship. Moreover, public/charity sector/ employers often seem either unwilling or ineligible to sponsor a Tier 2 visa for an international employee. What this means is that international students, who wish to work in the UK, have an unrealistic time frame to find a job and limited avenues for employment. They are often confined to the private/corporate sector and academia.

The UK government has introduced changes to post-study visa provisions from 2021. Tier 4 students will be allowed a two-year visa extension after completing their course to seek employment in the UK. There will no longer be salary thresholds or restrictions on the type of employment in the two-year post study visas. While this new government policy is a much-needed reform, post study employment has become more chequered due to the COVID19 pandemic. For students graduating before 2021, the six-month post study period to find employment has become prohibitive in light of the economic/employment crisis brought by the pandemic. Even the two-year post-study visa extension has to be reviewed in light of how circumstances related to employment and travel are impacted by the COVID19 pandemic.

### Recommendations:

- The funding bodies across the university have inconsistent policies over covering the costs of visa fees and NHS surcharge. The University and Senior Tutors should consider a mandatory policy for all funding bodies providing scholarships to international students to cover Visa and NHS surcharge fees.
- Colleges and Senior Tutors must take into account the additional burden of visa costs for international students and lower their fees charged to them.
- There should be concerted efforts from the university bodies to lobby the government to provide longer post study visas for students graduating in 2020 amidst the COVID19 pandemic.
- There should be continuous discussion on whether the two-year post study visa meets the needs of international students seeking employment in the UK. These conversations must involve the University's Career Service.

### 2.3. Language provisions and Institutional Language Policy (ILP)

The University of Cambridge is a member of the League of European Research Universities (LERU). Not only is Cambridge one of the few Universities in the League without a formal language policy, but it does not feature at all within the new report (LERU, Bernd Kortmann, Briefing Paper No. 4 - November 2019). 13 out of 18 responding LERU universities implement some form of official institutionalised language policy (ILP), most of them beginning from 2010.

Institutionalised Language Policy (ILP) documents specify the linguistic competence that students, lecturers and other staff need to attain in order to study or work at a given university – including a list of the specific language tests that are necessary and recognised by that institution. These documents also outline possible ways in which existing language deficits in prospective candidates might be addressed. Such strategies for language development address

not only the acquisition and improvement of the national (or: host) language(s) but also skills in additional languages<sup>31</sup>.

A survey by the European University Association (EUA) demonstrates that practically all European universities follow a strategy of internationalisation which primarily aims at promoting mobility across target groups<sup>32</sup>. Successful internationalisation and mobility depend upon coherent official language policies. Such policies should also define to what extent measures to internationalise universities need to be applied within the universities' administration.

In the UK Universities, there have been repeated calls for a consolidated effort to promote foreign language learning. The London School of Economics, for example, highlights the importance of education, in general, and the promotion of foreign language learning for local and international students, in particular. This is seen as a means for professional development. This movement in favour of foreign language learning is also supported by the British Council<sup>33</sup>;

International students who have met the University's 'Language Condition' of entry to graduate programmes may (and often do) still need additional support in developing their English skills for academic writing and presentation. Proof of English language proficiency is not sufficient to ensure that students can follow English-medium academic conventions and structure arguments appropriately as various aspects of constructing arguments are shaped by cultural factors. Training can help level the playing field between Home students who largely speak English as a first language and international students.<sup>34</sup>

Those students who are set the In-Sessional as a condition of entry by the Graduate Admissions Office (GAO), having marginally failed to meet the language condition for entry, are required to confirm their ability to pay for it (i.e. £385 per student in 2017/18) when meeting the financial conditions of entry. For all other students who might be referred to the Language Centre or elect to seek this additional (sometimes crucial) support, the fees (£280/student in 2017) impose an additional financial burden. In 2019 the cost of language training increased as follows: <sup>35</sup>

- A. Full Conditional: £790;
- B. Half Conditional: £420; and
- C. Elective (i.e. not conditional): £300.

International students who are non-native English speakers are expected to cover the expenses for (a) a very expensive pre-sessional English Course; and (b) an expensive in-sessional

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<sup>31</sup> For a review of language policies, see Gutierrez Eugenio, Ester and Nick Saville (2017). Policy review: The role of assessment in European language policy: a historical overview. Languages, Society & Policy, available at: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.9801>

<sup>32</sup> Colucci E. et al. 2014. Connecting mobility policies and practice: Observations and recommendations on national and institutional developments in Europe.

<sup>33</sup> British Council. 2017. Languages for the future, available at: [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_2017.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages_for_the_future_2017.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> see Cambridge Graduate Admissions, Competence in English, available at: <https://www.graduate.study.cam.ac.uk/international/competence-english>

<sup>35</sup> For more info, see the Cambridge Academic Development and Training for International Students (ADTIS), available at: <https://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/adtis/adtis-index.html>

academic English course. Other Universities in the UK (e.g. University of Manchester; SOAS; etc.) cover the cost of in-sessional support courses;

In a national survey by British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP), over 90% of HE institutions that responded provided In-Sessional support free of cost to international students who required it (also see Brewer S. et al., 2019. Papers on In-sessional English for Academic Purposes, LSE).

The GU and CUSU believe the promotion of foreign language learning for local and international students is crucial as a means for professional and personal development. From a HE perspective, the development of ILP goes hand in hand with the process of making universities more international.

### Recommendations:

- The University of Cambridge General Board and its Education Committee should formalise an Institutionalised Language Policy. This should include provisions and suggestions for Home students and for international students equally, in the spirit of building a global, international campus.
- In-sessional English courses and ‘student support’ provision should be included in student fees (without further increasing fees for international students).
- Heads of Schools and Heads of Houses, as well as the Cambridge Admission Office, should set up a mechanism to cover the expenses of in-sessional courses for students who may need this. In practical terms, this would potentially require a topslice of international fee income allocated to the Language Centre before distribution to Schools, thus reducing the allocations to Schools (without further increasing fees for international students). The Language Centre would estimate, based on calculations in other universities, that £45-£50 sliced off all international student fees would be sufficient, but this could be reviewed according to take-up/demand and actual costs incurred by the Language Centre to staff the delivery.

## 2.4. Language tests

If English is not the first language of an applicant or prospective student, the University of Cambridge will require the individual to submit evidence that the prospective student meets the University’s English language requirement before being admitted to the course of study. The University usually accepts IELTS, TOEFL, CAE (C1 Advanced) and CPE (C2 Proficiency) tests. These tests are remarkably expensive, and put unnecessary pressure on WP international students. Moreover, some prospective students may have to take these tests multiple times, until they reach the requisite score to be admitted to the course of study. The University has a list of countries that have special regulations concerning language assessments, known as List A and List B<sup>36</sup>. These lists set up exceptions, including not taking a test, taking an external language test, or having an assessment with the University of Cambridge Language Centre.

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<sup>36</sup> University of Cambridge Country Lists 2020-2021, available at: [https://www.graduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.2020.graduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/language\\_status\\_by\\_country\\_o.pdf](https://www.graduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.2020.graduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/language_status_by_country_o.pdf)

## Recommendations:

- Allow students who have just missed obtaining the university's minimum score in the English Language tests to take a pre-sessional English course at the University and begin their course of study. To widen access the University must provide the pre-sessional and in-sessional course free of charge to such students.
- To expand the List A and List B of Countries to include more countries which second language or official education language is English. All List B countries should be eligible for assessment by the Language Centre where necessary, or should be included under List A, and should not be asked for a language test.
- Applicants who are not nationals of countries listed under List A and List B, but who have studied there and completed a qualification equivalent to a UK Bachelor's should also be exempt from being set a language condition. This should not be limited to "within two years of the start date of their proposed course of study". This limitation should be removed entirely, or at least expanded to "within 10 years".
- Expand the list of accepted tests, to include more easily accessible testing platforms, e.g. the Duolingo English Test can be taken online anytime, anywhere, it can be completed in one hour and results are available in two days. This is accepted by over 2000 institutions, including Yale University, Duke University, and Columbia University of New York.

## 2.5. Discrimination and harassment

Discrimination and harassment (include sexual harassment) tend to be intersectional in nature as they take place on the basis of several protected characteristics such as gender identity, ethnicity, race and faith. The BCS 2018 shows that more than one third of Cambridge University students (36%) from outside the EU and 30% from the EU report being affected by prejudiced attitudes based on race or ethnicity.

In addition to more commonly understood forms of discrimination and harassment perpetrated by individuals against each other, discrimination is also evident in course curricula across departments. Reading lists have historically excluded non-European voices. Although the initiative taken by several departments, e.g. CCTL, the faculty of English and Department of Sociology, to diversify curricula is a step in the right direction, diversification needs to move beyond tokenism. Diversity initiatives thus far have failed to interrogate Eurocentrism, and international voices have not been successfully brought into mainstream research, teaching and learning frameworks to challenge the British/Western orthodoxies in the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Political developments such as Brexit and the recent COVID19 pandemic have exacerbated targeted racism and violence against minorities such as African-Caribbean, Black, Asian and European communities. A January 2016 survey on the impact of Brexit showed that 71% of people from ethnic minorities faced discrimination, an increase from 58% reported in previous

years<sup>37</sup>. Following the COVID19 pandemic, on May 2020 the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres<sup>38</sup> said that “the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering” and urged institutions to “act now to strengthen the response against the virus of hate.” It is likely that with protective measures like social distancing changing the nature of human interaction, discrimination and harassment may emerge in newer forms, including being exacerbated on online platforms.

## Recommendations:

- Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs)<sup>39</sup> of the strategies and policies of the University should be undertaken as frequently as possible, and the resulting EIAs reports should be made public. Particular attention should be given to the recovery strategy in COVID19 circumstances. Senior consultants of the Equality and Diversity section of the University should be more involved in strategic meetings of the University, and papers should be circulated to them for EIAs.
- Members of OSCCA<sup>40</sup> and SUAS<sup>41</sup> should be involved in drafting targeted strategies and trainings to tackle issues of discrimination towards BAME and international students recognising that these issues are systematic and structural. Conversations on discrimination and harassment resolutions should involve Senior Tutors, students representatives from Colleges and Schools and Faculties to address issues that arise both at the College and University levels.

## 2.6. Recruitment and widening participation (WP) strategies

There are students from 146 different countries at the University of Cambridge. The University currently has a greater number of international students than home students. According to the International student data<sup>42</sup>, out of a total of 22,693 students, 13,095 (57.7%) are international students. The greatest proportion of international students (9.8%) are from China. Four of the ten countries (Germany, Italy, France and Ireland) with the greatest number of students at the university are from the EU (12.6%). At a time when there is uncertainty about how global politics, including Brexit, will affect applicants from the EU (as the applications from the EU has fallen by 10% in 2019/2020), the university needs a carefully considered student recruitment strategy. For instance, one of the questions that the university may consider is how to maintain the student diversity if European student numbers continue to fall.

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<sup>37</sup> Source: Opinium. 1,006 people from ethnic minorities in the UK interviewed 22 February - 14 March 2019. Also see Opinium 2019. Racism rising since Brexit vote, available at: <https://www.opinium.co.uk/racism-rising-since-brexit-vote/>

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch, May 2020. Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>

<sup>39</sup> Equality Impact Assessment (EIA). The EIA is the University’s mechanism for undertaking equality impact analysis of policies or functions relevant to the Public Equality Duties (Equality Act 2010). The Process involves the analysis of information and feedback from protected groups and others - info available at: <https://www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/equality-diversity-cambridge/equality-impact-assessment-eia>

<sup>40</sup> Office of Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals (OSCCA), available at: <https://www.academic.admin.cam.ac.uk/education/student-operations/office-student-conduct-complaints-and-appeals-oscca>

<sup>41</sup> Students' Unions' Advice Service, info available at: [www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk](http://www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk)

<sup>42</sup> International Student Data, available at: <https://www.internationalstudents.cam.ac.uk/applying/global-community/international-student-data>

Maintaining diversity by admitting students from varied nationalities is only the first step. It is seen that students from cultures and backgrounds that are very different from British culture gravitate towards socialising with their own nationalities. While students' choices to choose their friends and activities of engagement must be respected, social and academic spaces need to be critically assessed to mitigate barriers they impose for such students to participate in them.

Once students are admitted, University departments, student unions and respective colleges hold a large number of induction events at the beginning of the year that are open to international students. This type of welcoming support seems to significantly shrink after the initial two or three weeks of courses at Cambridge; however, many international students have flagged the need for continued support and information as they progress through the year. For example, students who cannot travel home may feel particularly lonely and homesick during holiday time; students may require support to understand the expectations of the Cambridge system when they are carrying out their course assignments; students who fall onto financial hardship may require information about accessing funds or suitable employment. Data from the Student Union's Advice Services between July 2016 – February 2020 indicate the types of problems international students face while studying at the University. They show the services dealt with a total of 364 international student cases of which 316 were postgraduate cases and 48 were undergraduate cases. Of the postgraduate cases presented: 19% were health and wellbeing related with mental health the most common issue, 13% were examination-related (e.g. failure, underperformance, allowance, review) and 6% were finance-related (e.g. funding, hardship).

Although it may be argued that Colleges are set up to provide individualised support to their students, most graduate students have lesser contact with their colleges in comparison to undergraduates. Many live outside college premises, often in private accommodations, and spend the greatest amount of time in their respective departments, libraries and laboratories. Furthermore, the university needs to consider seriously the role played by support staff in colleges and departments such as, porters, cleaners, receptionists and buildings managers who play a significant role in the experiences of incoming students.

## **Spotlight on: Outfacing international strategies for the University of Cambridge**

The University of Cambridge has been discussing strategies for recruitment and impact outside of the University. Drafts of strategies are usually presented as outfacing, exterior plans, but have strong recruitment components, and therefore an educational scope.

The main problem of these strategies often is that they seem to claim to have an external facing approach, but include issues of education as well as access, which are historically treated as internal issues. These are two separate but interconnected aspects: one is external facing to recruit, the other is about the educational experience here in Cambridge, which has an inward focus for all students with wide implications. Both are important, but they have different dimensions which are often not clearly articulated in international strategies. The goals of these strategies are often clumsy and need unpacking to properly address these aspects.

It is important to remember that the international student dimension does not stop at recruitment. When drafting international strategies, the University needs to look at the whole student life-cycle and the implications of a growing international student body here in Cambridge. Dimensions include provision of cultural, academic and linguistic support; support for integration, and developing a global Cambridge culture which does not simply expect international students to conform to Anglocentric cultural and academic norms but which challenges those norms and negotiates for new ones to be articulated for both home and international students, through the development of respectful and equitable cross-cultural dialogue and encounters.

Competing globally to recruit will require the University not only to develop more international partnerships, but to address the international student experience and to recognise the support required for international students in Cambridge – culturally, academically, linguistically and in terms of welfare and mental health support. The recruitment side of the strategy should also acknowledge existing efforts of international postgraduate widening participation, and strengthen the international WD strategy and operations not just to reach “the best students”, but the “best students from all backgrounds”.

The COVID19 pandemic has introduced tremendous uncertainty about how the university will function in the near future. If the University is not able to open physically for Michaelmas term 2020, there will be new challenges to imagining how international students who are in different countries will be inducted into the Cambridge environment and culture, coupled with the risk of exacerbating cases of isolation.

### **Recommendations:**

- The University must first explore whether it is currently providing an international student experience which is sufficiently competitive with other leading global



providers of Higher Education, as part of this global recruitment goal. This dimension does not appear to be recognised in the external facing strategy of the University.

- Admission and recruitment strategies need to carefully consider WP strategies, for international and postgraduate students, and how to maintain diversity. If particular regions of the world are targeted for recruitment of students, there must be sound logic behind this, including clear strategies to ensure the inclusion and participation of these students in University life.
- While initial support through induction programmes are important, there should be support mechanisms in place for international students throughout the year. The challenges that students face through the year in areas such as but not limited to academic work, accommodation and funding must be anticipated beforehand strategies to address them must be put in place.
- The departments must be encouraged to create social spaces such as reading groups and recreational activities that will encourage participation of students from different countries and cultures. This is particularly important for graduate students in the social sciences arts and humanities who tend to work alone.
- College tutors must be encouraged to be more proactive in reaching out to their students to promote a healthy work-life balance.
- There must be recognition that there are systems and traditions unique to Cambridge such as matriculation and formal halls. Such ‘Cambridgeisms’ must be made more accessible by giving students adequate prior information so they know what to expect and feel more comfortable coming to these events.

## 2.7. Accommodation

The quality and affordability of accommodation impacts the overall wellbeing of international students. Unlike home students, international students do not have the advantage of understanding the UK housing market or have the ability to arrange viewings of the private accommodation before signing a lease. In this context the availability of college and university accommodation increases the access of international students to housing. However, there is great disparity in accommodation rents across colleges leading to disparate effects on student finances. For example, the NUS recommends that no more than half of income of students should be spent on rent<sup>43</sup>. The BCS 2018 shows that in Cambridge, single room rent ranges from £400 to £740 per month across colleges – and most postgraduate funding schemes offer a maintenance stipend of which more than 50% usually goes towards rent. Moreover, colleges also have varying policies about allowing students to arrive early and stay over vacation periods. Students who are required to vacate college accommodation during vacation periods face challenges of accessing adequate storage space. Overall, according to the BCS 2018, students from the EU are less likely to agree that their university rent is fair, with only 28% saying so, compared to 46% of home students. Similarly, the SBS 2018, shows that the satisfaction of postgraduate students regarding the cost of accommodation is low - 49% satisfaction amongst surveyed respondents<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> See GU’s report on affordable housing, available at: <https://www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/files/mcr-resources/reporthiddenchargesrent>

<sup>44</sup> The data here has not been disaggregated; however, c.65% of postgraduate students at the time of the survey were international.

The colleges also provide differing levels of support to postgraduate students who go on fieldwork. Undertaking research in the field is an inherently precarious task that may require the student to leave the field abruptly and return to the University or prolong the duration of the research. The challenges of securing college/university/private housing to accommodate the unpredictable nature of field research adds significant stress on students.

Many Cambridge colleges increase their accommodation rent each year leading to continuous disagreements between student groups and college administration. Even tentative suggestions, such as the case of college staff suggesting to increase rent amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, can cause distress among the international student community. While colleges have incurred losses on their rent income, the increase in rent during a period of increased unemployment and financial hardship/uncertainty for students puts immense strain on students. As Educating Beyond Borders<sup>45</sup> have pointed out, UK universities claim to be mindful of the plight of students who have nowhere else to go. But the main issue for students contacting charities is as urgent as dwindling food, worries how to get food and worries about accommodation contracts ending soon. This crisis is affecting international students disproportionately, with dozens of thousands of cases of stranded or at risk<sup>46</sup>.

### Recommendations:

- There must be a review of the services provided by University of Cambridge Accommodation Service<sup>47</sup>, especially in terms of the quality of the support and contribution of this service in improving the experience of international students looking for private accommodation.
- In order to provide consistent accommodation provision across the collegiate university, the Senior Tutors Committee should promote a system of good practice which will involve the documentation and sharing of student-friendly practices already in place across colleges. Some of these models that may be worth adopting across colleges is the practice of some colleges to provide guaranteed accommodation to students through the duration of their fieldwork.
- The University Accommodation Services and Colleges must provide better guidance to students who are renting from private landlords about good practices in a tenancy contract.
- The colleges and university must ensure that accommodation rent does not increase in the next academic year. A review of costs of renting University and college accommodation should be undertaken, given the fact that rent in Cambridge has reached hotel rates.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Meet the Charity Helping International Students Left Homeless By COVID-19, available at: <https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/health-support/meet-charity-helping-international-students-left-homeless-covid-19>

<sup>46</sup> The Guardian 2020. This article is more than 2 months old Thousands of students stranded at university amid UK lockdown, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/mar/24/thousands-of-students-stranded-at-university-because-of-uk-lockdown>

<sup>47</sup>See <https://www.accommodation.cam.ac.uk>

<sup>48</sup> Graduate Union calls for action on postgraduate student 'housing crisis'. Link: <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/17159>

## 2.8. Post-Brexit

Under the withdrawal agreement, there will be a transition period until the end of 2020 while the UK and EU negotiate arrangements for their future relationship. During this period, EEA and Swiss nationals continue to have the right of free movement to study and work in the UK and will be eligible to apply for the EU Settlement Scheme in order to protect their longer-term rights to live in the UK. This will be applicable to students admitted in Easter term 2020 and Michaelmas term 2021.

The Government intends to end freedom of movement for EEA and Swiss nationals and introduce a global immigration system from January 2021. The Home Office does not expect there to be a radical overhaul of the existing student visa routes to accommodate EEA and Swiss nationals but further detail is yet to be announced. New visa requirements would affect students starting their studies in 2021, although those admitted in Lent term next year may wish to consider moving to the UK prior 1 January in order to take advantage of the EU Settlement Scheme.

### Recommendations:

- We hope to see the International Student Office working closely with EU students, monitoring developments closely, and engaging with the Home Office and sector representative bodies as appropriate.
- We also hope to see frequent and consistent communication sent to current and new students in summer 2020, followed by periodic communications until January 2021.

## 2.9. Application fee waivers and higher tuition fees

Many universities in the UK, e.g. Cardiff, Exeter, and York, do not require prospective students to pay an application fee, whilst other universities charge significantly lower rates than Cambridge, which charges £65 application fee for postgraduate courses. It is the policy of the Graduate Admissions Office not to waive the application fee, unless applicants fall into one of the categories listed by the University of Cambridge<sup>49</sup>.

The Graduate Union agrees<sup>50</sup> that the £65 application fee is a significant barrier to fair access to study at Cambridge, and has been a vocal critic of the fee within the University. Over the last two years, the GU has helped to limit proposed rises in the application fee<sup>51</sup> and has also worked with the Graduate Admissions Office to expand the system of fee waivers for students from some countries and from low income households.

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<sup>49</sup> Cambridge Application Fee Waivers, available at: <https://www.graduate.study.cam.ac.uk/application-process/how-do-i-apply/application-fee>

<sup>50</sup> Postgraduate application fee criticised as a 'significant barrier' to improving access, available at <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/18832>

<sup>51</sup> see Item C1, minutes of the General Board of the Faculties 11/07/2018, available at: [https://www.governance.cam.ac.uk/committees/general-board/2018-07-18/MeetingDocuments/General%20Board%20Minutes%20-%2011%20July%202018%20\(Confirmed,%20Unreserved\).pdf](https://www.governance.cam.ac.uk/committees/general-board/2018-07-18/MeetingDocuments/General%20Board%20Minutes%20-%2011%20July%202018%20(Confirmed,%20Unreserved).pdf)

The GU has a policy to oppose any rises above £50, which was passed by the Graduate Union Council on the 9 July 2018, passing a motion opposing the proposed increase of the postgraduate application fee.

Besides significant access barriers, the National Union of Students (NUS)<sup>52</sup> agrees that international students are often, and should not be, treated as "cash cows" in the UK. Students from outside the EU pay up to four times the fees charged to UK students. Some international undergraduates pay up to £35,000 a year - more than three times the amount paid by home students<sup>53</sup>. At the University of Cambridge, international students currently pay approximately three times higher tuition fees for their course. In addition to this amount, unlike home students on their first degree, some international students pay more than £9,000 College fees per year. The University Composition Fees for international postgraduate students are also not fixed and disproportionately higher, usually two or three times higher than Home fees, coupled with extra "*Settling In*" fees of £350 for international students only.

### Recommendations:

- Fees should be fixed to ensure international students are treated fairly in the UK.
- The University needs to recognize that prospective postgraduates apply to multiple universities, while prospective undergraduates applying through UCAS only pay £24 for five applications.
- The University of Cambridge, in line with its Widening Access and Participation Strategy, should expand the system of fee waivers, and significantly reduce the application fees - ideally finding a way to scrape them entirely.

## 3. CLOSING REMARKS

The present paper aimed to discuss issues for international students raised by student representatives and members of staff, with a special emphasis on access and widening participation (WP), as well as on strategies to forge a global campus. It emphasises that WP is not limited to diversity of recruitment of international students, but includes a number of factors that affects their experience, satisfaction, success and participation in University life. These factors include recruitment and access, admission procedures, immigration requirements, language training and tests, discrimination and harassment, and accommodation arrangements. Data gathered from surveys, student reports to the Students' Unions, and responses from members of staff of the university and colleges and student representatives in a focus group discussion have informed the issues identified under each item discussed in the paper. In tandem with the challenges raised for WP, the GU has provided recommendations of strategies that can be undertaken to address them.

The GU hopes to see more efforts towards forging an inclusive global university, and encourages the senior leadership of the University to prioritise designing and revising policies

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<sup>52</sup> NUS: International students are treated like 'cash cows', available at: <https://www.artslondonnews.com/?p=46479>

<sup>53</sup>BBC 2013, International students pay premium at UK universities, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-23614142>

and services to make this vision a reality. This is particularly important in this time of uncertainty for international students, especially in a post Brexit and COVID19 world.

## APPENDIX: RESOURCES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CAMBRIDGE

- Cambridge City Council, Information for students:  
<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/information-for-students>
- International Student Guide Pre-arrival and orientation information:  
[https://www.internationalstudents.cam.ac.uk/files/international\\_student\\_guide.pdf](https://www.internationalstudents.cam.ac.uk/files/international_student_guide.pdf)
- The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA):  
<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk>
- NUS on council tax exemptions and discounts: [www.nus.org.uk/en/advice/money-and-funding/council-tax/](http://www.nus.org.uk/en/advice/money-and-funding/council-tax/)
- University Counselling Service: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk)
- International Student Office: <https://www.iso.admin.cam.ac.uk/contact>
- The Language Centre: <https://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk>
- Students' Unions' Advice Service: <https://www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk>
- Office of Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals (OSCCA):  
<https://www.academic.admin.cam.ac.uk/education/student-operations/office-student-conduct-complaints-and-appeals-oscca>
- Harassment & Sexual Misconduct:  
<https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/harassment-sexual-misconduct>